

MANI / Μάνη

Painting the Southern Peloponnese:
In the footsteps of Patrick Leigh Fermor

TOBY WIGGINS

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Foreword

I have always admired Toby's portraiture: his compositions are cool, quiet and engaging. His landscape subjects are equally intriguing, subdued in colour, reflecting the low northern light that makes Modern British landscape painting so enticing. You could say there is a familiarity in Toby's work that is both absorbing and settling.

However, a conversation held with the artist earlier this year hinted at a possible departure in style, not just in subject. In October 2017 Toby set off on a trek across a region in Greece known as the Mani, the southernmost part of the country, barren, desolate and rocky. How would an artist so versed in the English landscape tradition of Constable, Nicolson and Nash respond to the sun-scorched, wild and hostile terrain of the southern Peloponnese, where few travellers ever care to venture and even fewer stay? The answer is: with a heightened artistic vigour.

Toby's interest in making this journey had been fired, chiefly, by an appreciation of Patrick ('Paddy') Leigh Fermor's exploration of the history, people and geography of this southern peninsula, based on an odyssey he undertook through the region in 1951. The publication of 'Mani' seven years later confirmed Paddy's reputation as one of the English language's greatest exponents and unquestionably one of the leading travel writers of the 20th century. Toby is a great admirer of Paddy's writing; he is also an admirer of Paddy's great friend, the British artist John Craxton, who moved to Greece in the 1950's and who painted the covers for most of Paddy's greatest travel books. Paddy's wife, Joan, often accompanied Paddy on his travels, quietly and unobtrusively photographing the landscapes through which they passed. Together they designed a beautiful Maniat home, in a coastal village called Kardamyli, an idyllic setting they bequeathed to the Benaki Museum as a study centre and which Toby visited on his own Grecian odyssey.

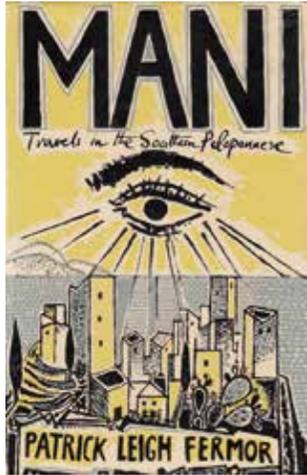
While Joan's photographs of the Mani are mostly in black and white, Toby celebrates this rugged landscape in glorious tones of different colour, each painting revealing the architecture and topography of the region blistered by the sun. These paintings represent a new response to a new kind of landscape. They are characterised by the vivid saturated colour he discovered on his journey and altogether different in light, texture and tone from the cool and brooding landscapes of earlier work. They are almost post-Impressionist in their intensity.

He returned to his Dorset studio with a body of tiny plein air studies, hard won in the Maniat heat and dust. There he set about making larger works, created with as much reliance on his memories and imagination as the studies taken from his easel. To capture the texture of the land, he added marble dust to his paints, creating works that celebrate both the baked red earth of the Mani and the fierce sun overhead.

He has succeeded in capturing the idiosyncrasies and peculiarities of this southern peninsula of mainland Greece in a striking and singular way. He has also left his own mark for a wider appreciation of this sacred land of myth and heroes.

Lewis McNaught,
Director of the Mall Galleries

Introduction



Patrick Leigh Fermor,
Mani—Travels in the Southern Peloponnese
Cover illustration: ©John Craxton 1958

'When God had finished making the world, he had a sack of stones left over and he emptied it here...'

Patrick Leigh Fermor

I was always fond of John Craxton's cover illustrations for Patrick Leigh Fermor's travel books, but had not really understood the longstanding connection between these two men or their mutual love for Greece until Ian Collins' retrospective exhibition and monograph on Craxton in 2011. It unveiled a remarkable series of luminous paintings, many in tempera, that seemed to distil the essence of Greek landscape and life (Cretan in particular). Their linear form owes much to Modernism, but also to the close study of Byzantine painting and the mentoring of Greek painter Nikos Hadjikyriakou-Ghika, a lifelong friend to both Craxton and Leigh Fermor. This creative fellowship played out during the second half of the 20th century moving between their homes on Crete, Hydra and the Mani peninsula and has just been celebrated in an exhibition called 'Charmed Lives in Greece' at the British Museum earlier this year.

'Its geographical seclusion, locked away beyond the mountains on the confines of Sparta, and the steepness and aridity of its mountains are the key to the whole thing'

Patrick Leigh Fermor

I read 'Mani, Travels in the Southern Peloponnese' (written in Ghika's house on Hydra) while visiting Kardamyli, where I found the Leigh Fermor house on a low cliff surrounded by olive and cypress trees. While walking in the nearby Vyros Gorge, I was transfixed by a tiny figure leading goats high up in the Taygetus mountains; a scene straight from the book of 60 years earlier. Partly because of the evocative writing, the paintings by Craxton and Ghika and because of the eerie beauty of this place, Mani cast a spell; it got under the skin. I decided to return and paint some of it for myself.

My plan was to walk in the footsteps of Leigh Fermor and in October 2017 I caught a bus with a friend, from Kalamata down the coast to Oitylo, where began a walk around the southernmost tip of the peninsula, known as 'Mesa Mani' or the 'Deep Mani'.

During a three week trek, I made a number of pleinair studies on a route which took us over mountains, along treacherous cliffs and across plains baked by the sun. We slept out in olive groves, in abandoned war-towers, by derelict Byzantine churches and once on the very top of Mount Sagias under a full moon.

On my return, I began to work a number of studies into larger paintings and made others in response to the experience and memory. They are my attempt to translate the sensation of being there, the physical harshness and aridity; the fierce sun, the empty space, the colours and light of this unique place apart.

Toby Wiggins 2018

'towers and walls that so exactly tallied in texture and colour with the stone crop of the surrounding hills that it was as if the landscape had shrugged them together into a system of lanes and shot those tall parallelograms into the air on a sudden subterranean impulse'

Patrick Leigh Fermor



Mountain tower
oil on canvas 71 x 107cm

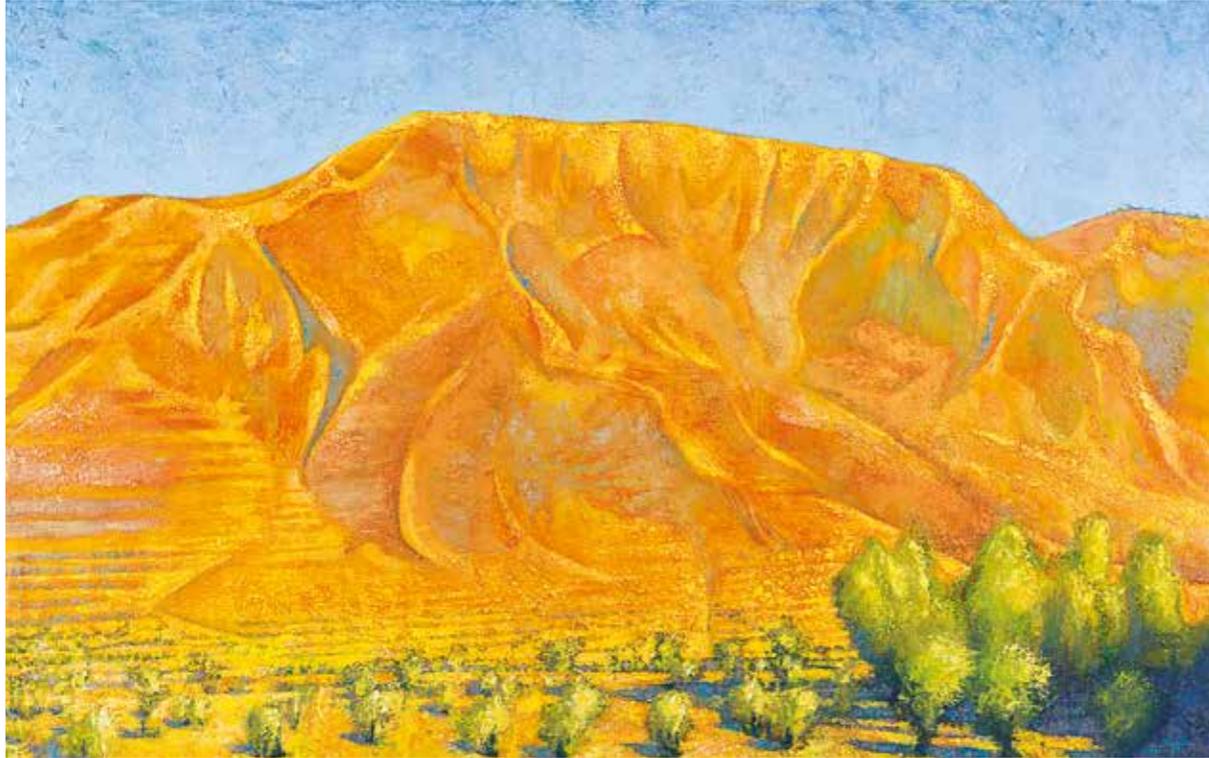
'...the world holds its breath, and the noonday devil is at hand'

Patrick Leigh Fermor



The great crag: Mt. Elijah above Ano Boularii, noon
oil on canvas 76 x 122cm

Ravens croak lazily overhead, paths peter out to nowhere.
Everything is baked and cured in the fierce sun.



Burning rock: Mt. Elijah above Ano Boularii, mid afternoon
oil on canvas 76 x 122cm

'Nothing moved and in the trembling and fiery light they had the hallucinatory improbability of a mirage'
Patrick Leigh Fermor



Pyrgos 1: Tower house
oil on gesso panel 25.5 x 22.2cm

"If you offend me, I must kill you, but also I must kill your family and all those who work for you and have dealings with you". I sipped my wine.



Pyrgos 2: War tower
oil on gesso panel 35.5 x 26cm

"To our left loomed the great crag of Mt. Elijah above Boularii, stark in the morning light, but exquisitely beautiful when we had seen it the previous evening in the full glow of sunset...an indescribably rich yet delicate shade somewhere between rose-pink and mauve that lasted about five minutes before the sun disappeared into the Messenian Gulf" Greenhalgh/Eliopoulos



Moment of majesty: Mt. Elijah above Ano Boularii, sundown
oil on canvas 76 x 122cm

'the sun was already high in the limitless Greek sky: a sky which is higher and lighter and which surrounds one closer and stretches further into space than anywhere else in the world'

Patrick Leigh Fermor



The agreeable mellowness of decay: Gerolimenas harbour
oil on linen 100 x 100cm



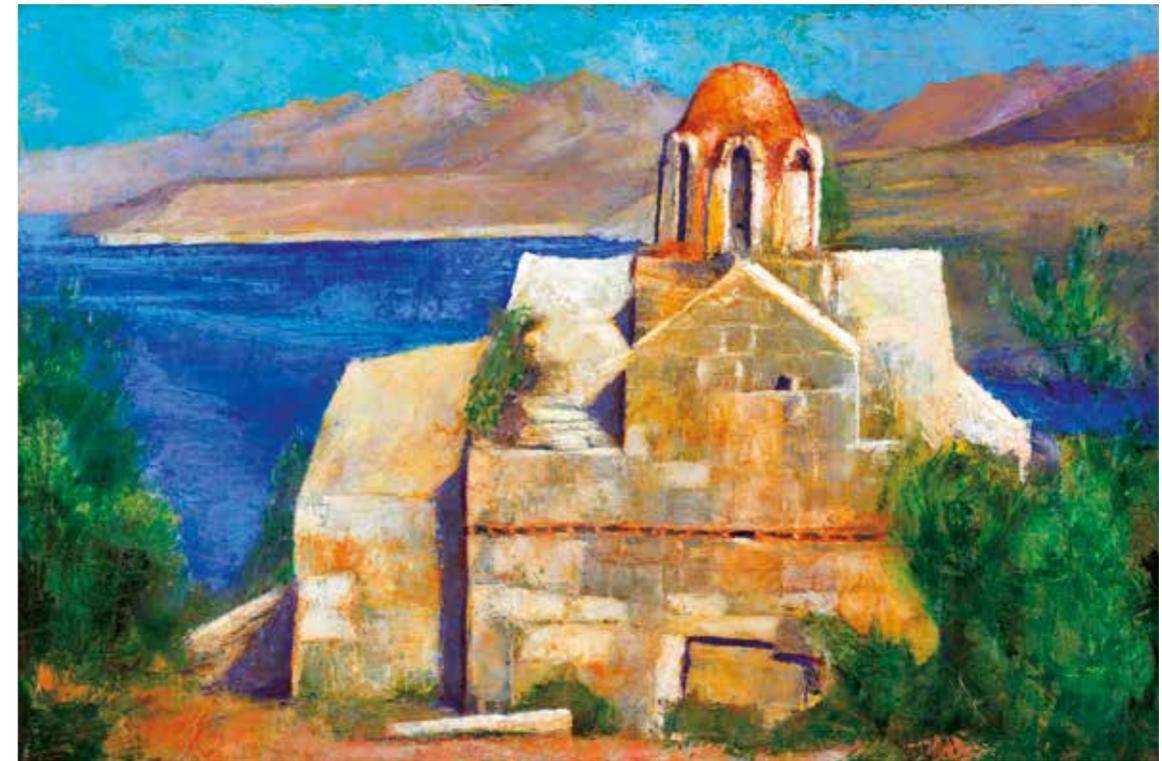
Figs, agaves and occasional surprise at pomegranates; skins like glazed ceramic, mottled red and orange. The flash of a jay among branches. Scattered cigarette packs and spent gun cartridges.



The zig zag road: on the way to Charia
oil on canvas 40 x 75cm

'The very desolation and melancholy of this neglected church in so beautiful a setting would have stimulated Byron or Shelley to write verses that Burne-Jones would have loved to illustrate'

Greenhalgh/Eliopoulos



The poet's church, Vlacherna, Mezapos
oil on canvas 40 x 75cm



The shadowless port: Bay of Itilon
oil on board 15.5 x 51cm

*'Soon we were rounding a cape and sailing at a slant across a broad inlet that penetrated a few miles into the mountains...
when we left the caique's cool awning the sun came stampeding down to the attack'*

Patrick Leigh Fermor

'Dawn and sunset civilize and rationalize these blank expanses of grey mountains, reducing systemless chaos to sense...'

Patrick Leigh Fermor



Barren rock, ghosts and dangerous people: towards the Pentadactilos mountains
oil on board 15.5 x 25.5cm

'There is no softening of the utter barrenness of its waterless landscape'

Greenhalgh/Eliopoulos



Down the shady side to the bad mountains: from Sotiras to the Kakouvoulia
oil on board 19 x 31cm



Frying pan rock (Tigani) and the bay of Mezapos
oil on board 15.5 x 51cm

I worked on this study to the early morning refrain of guns firing and occasional buckshot raining through the olive branches around me. I didn't stay long.

His generation never left the environs of the village
and, having been born there, would certainly die there.



Bereft of life: derelict farmhouse near Diros
oil on board 15.5 x 21.5cm

The light was almost lost, a black cow crashed among the olives behind me,
somewhere close by jackals howled in unison and overhead the click and flicker of bats.



Bulls, bats and jackals : Gerolimenas bay (Giali) from Ano Boularii, dusk
oil on board 15.5 x 25.5cm

We walked along narrow lanes of red earth between drystone walls enclosing gnarled olives, donkeys, a few precious cows; small, black and horned. They stood where they could among rocky outcrops, shattered boulders as big as cars and sharp stones of every size. The bare bones of this place poke through at every turn.



The City of Mars: Areopoli from the sanctuary of Sotiras
oil on board 15.5 x 21.5cm

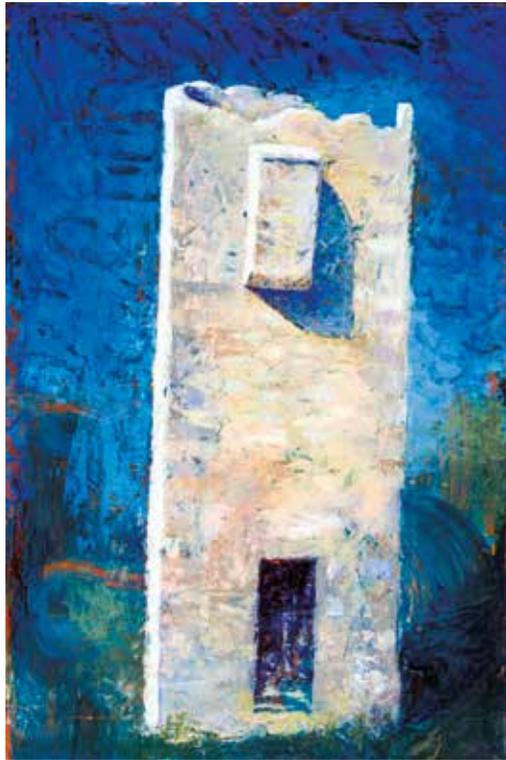
Tough little hawthorns studded this miniature landscape. It was here that we met John Craxton's goats; jaggy and wiry with Roman nosed heads and the devil yellow eyes.



In the dolines on top of Mt Sangias
oil on board 15.5 x 25.5cm

*'In appearance it was a relic of the Dark Ages...there was nothing except a clumsily hewn date over the doorway.
Inside it was cold and dark'*

Patrick Leigh Fermor



Pyrgos 3: They still give a gun as a present for a son
oil on gesso panel 38.3 x 25.5cm

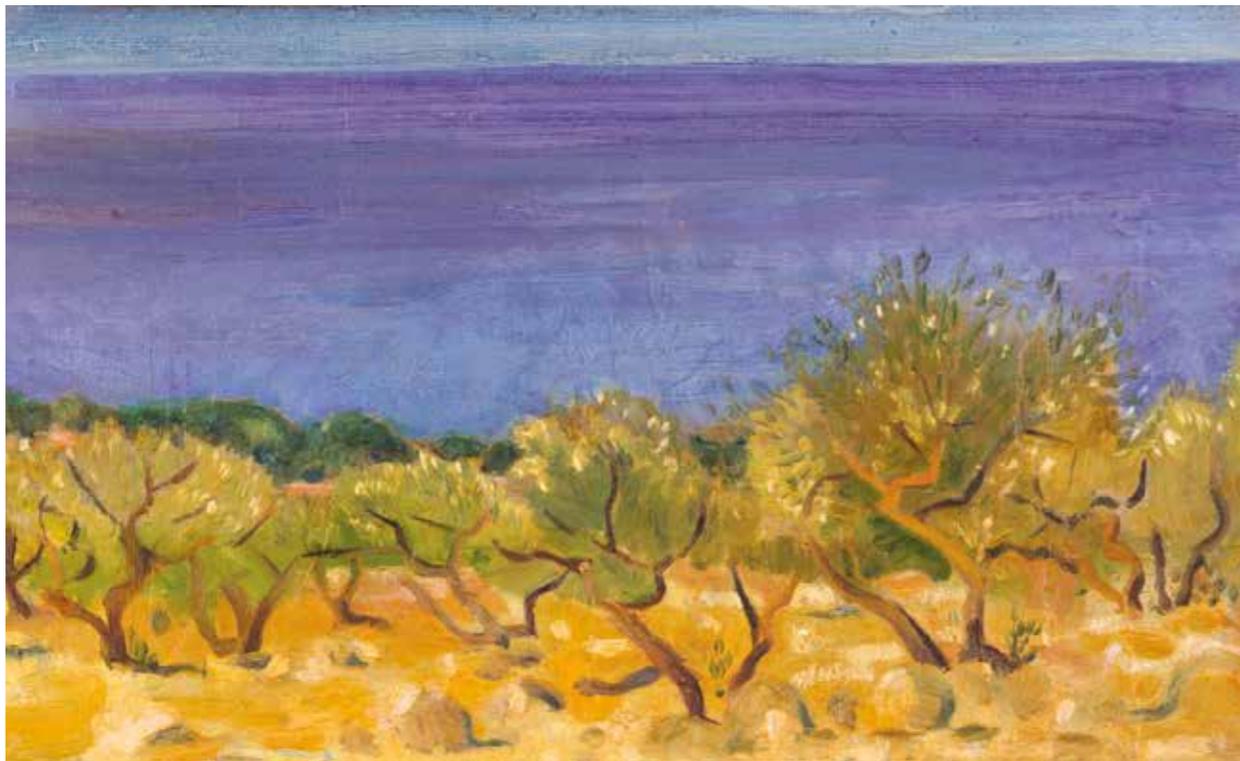
*'The wide ridge was jagged with broken towers like the spikes along an iguana's back...
an angular stook of towers was rooted in a cloud of cactus and olive...'*

Patrick Leigh Fermor

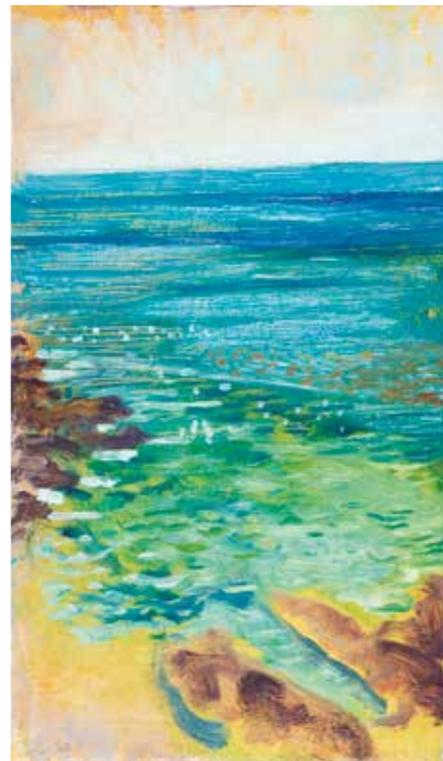


The old hornet's nest; Vatheia
pencil and charcoal on paper 61 x 75cm

A meagre dusting of thin, red soil collects in pockets between stones. A stiff breeze might blow it all out to sea and in winter, torrents of rain water have scoured it clean away. The olive somehow endures.



Sun blistered, sea girdled: olive grove by the Gulf of Messenia
oil on board 15.2 x 25.5cm



Sweat and salt water – Gulf of Kolokythia
oil on board 15.5 x 25.5cm

Toby Wiggins

Toby graduated from post graduate study at the Royal Academy Schools in 1999. He won the Prince of Wales Drawing Award in 2005 and again in 2013. In 2006 he was elected to the Royal Society of Portrait Painters and won the BP Portrait Travel Award that year. He subsequently journeyed around the 'Wessex' region making portraits of its rural communities. This was exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery in 2007 and at Dorset County Museum in 2008. He won the Lynn Painter-Stainers Prize for figurative painting in 2009 and has been engaged in portrait commissions, landscape painting expeditions and teaching at various institutions including the Arts University at Bournemouth, Heatherleys and the Art Academy, London.

Art Education

1996–1999	Royal Academy Schools London, Post Graduate Diploma in Painting
1991-1994	Falmouth College of Art and Design, BA (Hons) Degree in Fine Art
1990-1991	Bournemouth College of Art and Design, Foundation Diploma

Awards

2013	Prince of Wales Drawing Prize (RP)
2009	The Lynn Painter Stainer Prize for Figurative Painting (Worshipful Company of Painter Stainers)
2007	University of Wales Purchase Prize (Print Originals, Mall Galleries)
2006	BP Travel Award (National Portrait Gallery) Changing Faces Prize (RP)
2005	Prince of Wales Drawing Prize (RP)

Selected Exhibitions

2018	<i>'Mani–Painting the Southern Pelopennese'</i> , Amanda Aldous Fine Art Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Show New English Art Club (NEAC)
2017	<i>'Drawn'</i> Royal West of England Academy Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Show
2016	Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Show
2015	Lynn Painter Stainers Decennial Exhibition, Mall Galleries Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Show <i>'Still Alive: The Contemporary Still Life'</i> , Beverley Art Gallery, East Riding Yorkshire
2014	<i>'Small Paintings'</i> Bohun Gallery, Henley on Thames <i>'Contemporary Drawing'</i> The Arts Stable, Childe Okeford, Dorset Society of Wildlife Artists, Mall Galleries <i>'Still Alive: The Contemporary Still Life'</i> Mall Gallery Winchester RP show <i>'Family Familiar'</i>
2013	Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Show
2012	Hackwood Arts Festival, Hants Threadneedle Offices Annual Holburne Portrait Prize, Bath <i>'London Views'</i> Mall galleries <i>'Painting the Sea'</i> Kelly Ross Art Stable, Dorset Royal Academy Summer Show Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Show
2011	Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Show RAC Pall Mall, London
2010	Discerning Eye, Mall Galleries 20/21 British Art Fair Royal College Holburne Portrait Prize, Bath Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Show Art Stable, Dorset Bohun Gallery, Henley on Thames Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Show

2009	Lynn Painter-Stainers Prize, Painters' Hall, 9, Trinity Lane, London <i>'Timeless Bath'</i> , Quest Gallery, St James St, Bath <i>Working Artists</i> , Dorset, Poole Lighthouse Arts centre, Dorset <i>Remembered Landscape</i> , Long & Ryle, John Islip St, London <i>London Arts Fair</i> , Business Design Centre Islington, Solo show <i>'Wessex Land, Wessex People'</i> , Dorset County Museum, Dorset Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Show 20/21 Art Fair RCA (represented by Long & Ryle), London <i>'Two Portrait Painters'</i> , St. Barbe Museum and Art Gallery, Hants <i>'Human Form'</i> , Atrium Gallery, Dorset Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Show Bulldog Trust RP Self Portrait, Temple Place, London <i>'Figure This'</i> , Mall Galleries, London <i>'Past Present'</i> , Sesame Gallery, London <i>'Toby Wiggins/Victoria Jinivizian'</i> Morgan Boyce Gallery, Marlborough, Wiltshire <i>'On Form'</i> , A Gallery, London <i>'Print Originals'</i> , Mall Galleries, London Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Show Jerwood Drawing Prize Exhibition <i>'Mystery Portrait Postcards'</i> , National Portrait Gallery, London Roman Black Gallery, London Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery, London Beaux Arts, Bath
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2006	Jerwood Drawing Prize Exhibition <i>'Mystery Portrait Postcards'</i> , National Portrait Gallery, London Roman Black Gallery, London Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery, London Beaux Arts, Bath
2005	New English Art Club, Mall Galleries, London Royal West of England Academy, Bristol
2004–12	<i>Summer Exhibition</i> , Royal Academy, London
2003/4/5/7	<i>Discerning Eye</i> , Mall Galleries, London
2003/4/6/7	<i>BP Portrait Award</i> , National Portrait Gallery, London

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Sophie and Ezra for their patient support as ever, Ilay Cooper for his companionship on our journey around Mani, Pamela-Jane and Stephen Shaw for advice and knowledge, Victoria Jinivizian, Mungo Powney, Christopher Mason and Daniel Corbett for their insights and constructive criticism and finally Amanda Aldous for her enthusiasm and organisation of this show.

Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese

Patrick Leigh Fermor 1958

Deep into Mani: Journey to the Southern Tip of Greece

Peter Greenhalgh and Edward Eliopoulos 1985

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